



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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August 1996

AUGUST FIELD TRIP

Ruth Beck will lead a field trip to Craney Island on Saturday, August 17th. As usual, we will meet in the CW Visitors Center parking lot at 7:15 AM and leave promptly at 7:30. Look for a gathering in the lot over to the right side of the building as you enter.

For readers who are not already familiar with it, Craney Island is a small island made up of material dredged from the James and Elizabeth Rivers off Portsmouth. The US Army Corps of Engineers operates and maintains it. The local people who manage Craney were given the 1996 Virginia Society of Ornithology's award for their continued support for conservation and protection of wildlife habitats.

The island offers both mud flats and sandy beaches, plus fresh and brackish waters for waders and migratory shore birds—particularly Least Terns and Piping Plovers. Visitors can look forward to seeing a varied mix of shore birds, perhaps even a Phalarope if we're lucky.

It's hot there this time of year! If you come, be sure to wear a hat and bring some mosquito repellent. Bring water and a mid-day snack too. We probably won't get back to Williamsburg 'til 1 PM.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

I hope everyone is enjoying a relaxing summer. It is hard to believe the days are getting shorter and the shore birds have already started migrating. I have watched the progress of many Osprey nests as we sail the York River and most of the young

have disappeared from the nests as we watch them do a little fishing. The birds around the yard are about through raising young, as the Goldfinches are the last to finish. I still hear the young making noise as the adults teach them the rules of staying alive. In my yard, with two dogs, that can be quite a challenge. At least this year our younger dog didn't feel the need to bring us any presents of the feathered kind. Hopefully, the hummingbird activity will pick up some as they prepare for their long journey.

As the summer draws to an end Bird Club activity level begins to rise. In August there will be a field trip to Craney Island to see what is passing through in the shore bird category. For those of us who have a mental block against shore bird identification, this is an excellent trip to get good looks at these confusing birds. In September our monthly meetings begin again the third Wednesday of the month and the monthly field trips are always on the following Saturday. I have missed seeing everyone and look forward to getting started again.

Enjoy what is left of this summer. Be sure to take note of birds sighted on any trips taken. We look forward to hearing about members' adventures during the summer months to places that may have produced some exciting birds. I look forward to seeing everyone at Craney or in September at our first regular meeting in the fall. Happy Birding—Lee Schuster

SUPERBOWL OF BIRDING

Three club members, Bill Williams, Tom Armour and Brian Tabor are going to take part in the 2nd

Annual Superbowl of Birding competition in September. This team won last year's Super Bowl, finding 101 species of birds on Virginia's Eastern Shore in just six hours.

The competition, which covers the whole Delmarva Peninsula, pits teams of birders from all over the area against each other for fun and excitement. It also raises money for KESTREL, Virginia's non-profit bird observatory. KESTREL uses the funds for educational and research purposes related to migrating birds. Bill and Brian are both KESTREL board members. The team must find sponsors to pledge money, either as a flat donation or on a per bird basis. If you would like to be a team sponsor for the competition or if you would like a KESTREL brochure, please contact Bill at 229-6095 or 154 Lakewood Drive, Williamsburg, or Brian at 253-1181 or 103 Exeter Court, Williamsburg.

FEEDER WASH RESULTS

The club joined with *Wild Birds Unlimited* and *Ambassador Cleaners* in our first bird feeder wash Saturday, June 8. It was a fundraiser for the bird club's grant that is awarded annually to a William & Mary student doing local bird research. From 10 to 2 that day eight people took apart feeders that were brought in by the public, then soaked, scrubbed, steam cleaned and finally reassembled them. Most were returned to the owners in better shape than when they arrived. Some were returned with a few extra parts they didn't come with, but none went home with less. The group cleaned about forty feeders and raised \$106 for the grant. Special thank you's go to *Wild Birds Unlimited* for all their hard work in hosting and organizing the day, and to George Ologge and his steam cleaning company, *Ambassador Cleaning*, for providing the equipment and personnel. Thanks also to the club member volunteers who donated their time that Saturday to help out.

By the way, proceeds to the club from our members' purchases at *Wild Birds Unlimited*, January to May this year, amount to another \$206.80! These two additions to our treasury go a long way towards funding this year's grant.

ANNUAL PICNIC

Our annual summer picnic, held on June 8, was another great success. Many members attended and brought lots of food for a delicious pot luck supper. A big thanks goes out to Ruth and Sherwin Beck for opening their beautiful home to us, and to Emily Sharrett and Jeanne Armour for organizing the event. Although the birds were not very visible, we knew of their presence by song. And watching Sherwin feed hot dogs to a wary old fox who comes into their yard for a meal every day was an added treat. The fox had to out-manuever some racoons who were moving in on the action too. This picnic is an event not to be missed! If you were unable to attend this year, make it a point to come next time.

GRANT RECIPIENT

The club received several grant proposals again this year. After an evaluation the selection committee chose to award this year's Bird Club grant of \$500 to David Whalen. His research project, is titled "Breeding Ecology of Barn Owls In Upland Versus Marsh Habitats in Virginia." David has previously worked on a study of Saw-whet Owl migration on the Eastern Shore. Congratulations to David—we wish him good luck in his research project. The club looks forward to hearing the results of the work later in the year.

NEW MEMBERS

Welcome to all these new members:

Camilla Buchanan,
Debra & Camilla Hill
196 The Maine
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Renee Flinchum
132 Old Carriage Way
Williamsburg, VA 23188

Bruce, Wendy, Daniel &
Aaron Keener
104 Trolls Path
Williamsburg, VA 23188

Cherie Doverspike
109 West Links
Williamsburg, VA 23188

FIELD NOTES FOR JUNE & JULY

The real excitement for these months was the chance to see some extremely rare visitors brought to the James River by Hurricane Beulah. Tom Armour, Bill Williams and Brian Tabor took advantage of the opportunity and enjoyed seeing these birds: Wilson's Storm Petrel, Sooty Tern, Black Tern, Sandwich Tern and White Pelican. No previous record of the Wilson's Petrel, only one previous record of the Sooty and Sandwich Terns, nine previous sightings of the White Pelican, and the Black Tern is listed as an "unusual summer visitor."

As of August 6, the Pelican has been seen on and off for the past month at Hog Island. Why, oh why didn't we think of following up on the hurricane activity? Must head for Hog Island and the rivers after the next one.

Many of the birds sighted in June were also seen in July but it is rather interesting to see the list of those which dropped out (and far easier than making too complete and largely repetitive reports), we'll start with the list seen in June which *did not* repeat in July: Cattle Egret (Gospel Farm), Cooper's Hawk (Kingswood), Kestrel (Camp Peary), Wild Turkey (Camp Peary), King Rail (College Creek), Frank-lin's Gull (Ferry Landing), Prairie Warbler (Camp Peary, Chippokes, Colonial Parkway), Prothonotary Warbler (Chippokes, Jolly Pond, Kingsmill, Hickory Signpost Road), Louisiana Waterthrush (Chip-pokes, Hickory Signpost, Jolly Pond), Yellow-breasted Chat (Jamestown Farms, Hog Island, Jamestown Road), Grasshopper Sparrow (Drumonds Field.)

And July reports from our usual haunts:

Jamestown Is./Colonial Pkwy./James River

Wilson's Storm Petrel, Forster's Tern, Sooty Tern, Black Tern, Royal Tern, Least Tern, Common Tern, Black Skimmer, Great Egret, Green Heron, Black Vulture, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Wood Thrush, White-eyed Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo,

Northern Oriole, Orchard Oriole, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, Red-headed Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Marsh Wren. (At College Creek) King Rail, Clapper Rail and Spotted Sandpiper.

Ferry/Chippokes/Hog Island

Great Egret, Bald Eagle, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Common Tern, Least Tern, Sandwich Tern, Greater Yellow Legs, Lesser Yellow Legs, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowicher, Long-billed Dowitcher, Bobolink, Blue Grosbeak, Orchard Oriole. (Chippokes) Great Egret, Green Heron, Wood Thrush, White-eyed Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Parula Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Ovenbird, Indigo Bunting, Orchard Oriole.

York State Park

Royal Tern, Red-headed Woodpecker, Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Yellow-throated Vireo, Yellow-throated Warbler, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, Summer Tanager.

Miscellaneous and Neighborhoods

Yellow-crowned Night Heron (Queens Lake). Red-shouldered Hawk, Yellow-throated Vireo, Prothonotary Warbler (Hickory Signpost Road). Hooded Warbler, Wood Thrush, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager (Kingswood).

Contributors to this month's composite report are: Joy Archer, Tom Armour, Juel Duke, Joe & Grace Doyle, Bill Sheehan, Bill Snyder, Richard Stanley, Brian Taber, and Bill Williams. *Could you have added to this report? Next month call Bill Sheehan to add your sightings, 220-2122, but please notice that we don't report the common resident birds nor the very common visitors. You can also get help from Bill in identifying species if you can see it but can't figure out what it is!*

A FEW SPRING LISTS TO REPORT

by Bill Holcombe

I know that more than six birders kept lists of their March, April and May sightings but there's no way to report what did not come in. However, I am so proud of exceeding my goal of 150 sightings that I refuse to skip the report—

Tom Armour saw 175 and noted two unusually early ones, “March 3, Osprey and Laughing Gulls at Kingsmill.” I thought his Dunlin, March 5 and the Meadowlark on March 1 were pretty good too, but Tom didn’t bother noting those. But I bet that he won’t forget the Gold Eagle over the James on April 29 anytime soon.

Martha Briggs reported 57 species and included some nice comment. “Heard the Whip-poor-will on a warm April night—he doesn’t whip if it’s chilly. Turkeys are staying in the woods this year. Hear them but have seen only two. Hoping the mothers bring the poults into the field when they’re larger.”

Bill Holcombe: While I truly am proud of my 153 Virginia sightings, the truth is that I would not have made that total without the May 5 trip to Craney Island with Ruth Beck and Tom Armour, and the May 5 Spring Bird Count on Hog Island with Brian Taber. Those two trips netted nine new life list birds and 33 on my spring count. Best new bird was the Prothonotary Warbler at Chip-pokes Swamp on a glorious, bright April 22 morning. Moral of the story is get out on the Christmas and Spring Bird Counts and go to Craney with Ruth Beck and you’ll see a heck of a lot of birds.

Bill Sheehan reported 163 sightings with a note, “Total 163 without Rockdoves, Starlings and House Sparrows. Those are non-birds.” (None of Bill’s opinions are “luke warm.”) But Bill saw a lot of great birds, including sharing that Golden Eagle with his birding partner, Tom Armour. And we shared together the Redpoll in Juel Duke’s back yard on March 18. Bill also saw *all* of the vireos and 19 warblers.

Bill Williams broke the 200 mark again with 217 birds. Bill saw all of the ducks except Greater Scaup and the Eiders. And all of the warblers except Palm, Swainson’s, Connecticut, and Mourning. But then you can’t miss too many birds on the VSO card and still report over 200 sightings. Bill wins our spring listing event, so sometime when the moon is in the right phase at a Bird Club meeting we will carry him three times around Millington Hall on our shoulders!

Marilyn Ziegler saw 117 birds including 11 ducks, 4 vireos, 11 warblers, and she and Tom Armour are the only participants to see the

Dickcissel. She also had a wonderful bird to finish with when she listed a Prothonotary Warbler on May 27, her last entry.

For those of us who do this it makes March, April and May very special months of the year. I hope that next year there are more of us listing and that I do get *all* of the cards back.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

by BILL HOLCOMBE

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

In our part of the world we hear this bird from late spring until late summer but rarely lay eyes on it. And that is too bad as this summer visitor is a very handsome bird. The bird is a lovely soft brown from its yellow bill, over the top of the head and down the back, while the underside is a bright, clear white. Wings in flight show chestnut-reddish patches. The underside of the long tail is black with large, bright ovals of white, linked down both sides. Fortunately, when you are lucky enough to spot one of these birds it will most likely be in a tree top. You will be looking at this clear, unique marking on the underside of the tail, which makes the identification positive.

Bill Sheehan’s records indicate that the Yellow-billed Cuckoo has an early arrival date of April 23 and a last sighting of October 24. During a lot of that time and especially in the warmer months you can hear the song which John Terres describes as “kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-keow-keow-keow,” somehow sounding as though producing that long string of “kuk’s” was exhausting and at the end the bird ran out of steam. So the calls trail off. The sound is usually coming from dense foliage at the tops of trees where this bird finds its favorite food, caterpillars. While the flat, poorly-made nests are low, only 3 to 10 feet off the ground, it is very difficult to spot either the nest or the cuckoo’s frequent feeding trips. About 12 inches long with a 16-inch wing span, this is not a small bird. It is the original “stealth” flyer.

The female usually lays three to four pale blue-green eggs at 2 to 3-day intervals. Eggs hatch after about 14 days. After another 7 to 9 days the chicks habitually start to climb about the nesting bush or tree. They continue this until they take

flight in about another two weeks. While not nearly the nesting predators like Cowbirds, Cuckoos will occasionally lay their eggs in the nests of Black-billed Cuckoos and even more rarely in nests of other birds. This family trait may have something to do with the fact that these birds rarely suffer from nest predation by other birds like the Cowbird.

Trivia bits: flight speed 22 mph; other names include “Kow-Kow,” “Rain Dove,” and “Storm Crow; the bird has two toes facing forward and two back rather than the usual three forward and one back.

This bird is a summer resident over most of the United States, with the exception of Minnesota and the Dakotas, and winters in South America as far south as Uruguay and Argentina. It has also wandered to western Europe. It is commonly heard throughout Williamsburg and surrounding counties all summer long. No one has advice on where you may see this summer tourist although several of us have spotted it at Jamestown Island during mid-spring searches. If you see what appears to be an extra long-tailed bird soaring gracefully between treetops, you may be seeing our August bird of the month.

Information sources include *Peterson's Field Guide to Eastern Birds*, *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John Terres and the Williamsburg Bird Club Records kept by Bill Sheehan.

HELP by Lew Hoppes

I am a bird feeder—rather tall, with six holes and six little perches. The birds come and pick at my stuffing of sunflower seeds, millet and other little round things. I find it very interesting as I never know who is coming next. There are times, of course, when nobody comes and I feel lonely and neglected. I am going to log a typical day. Does it sound interesting? I hope so because, well, here goes.

Sunday, July '96, 8:01 AM. Goldfinch comes to top perch—pick, pick, pick. 8:03 another one to the top perch. 8:06 both leave. 8:10 Chickadee darts in, picks and dashes off. 8:15 three Chickadees dart off almost before they've had time to dart in.

I have time between birds to think about other things. My world is circumscribed but I have an active mind. The mind is such a help—ah, 8:30 a Tufted Titmouse bottom right. Then comes 9 AM and 10 AM and nothing comes until 10:30 AM when a Red-bellied Woodpecker hangs upside down and throws my seeds all over the place. Then a Blue Jay comes. He screams. Then he screams again. “Quiet,” I say. He pays no attention, jumps to my left bottom, falls off and tries again. Succeeds. Picks at my middle. Another Jay. Another scream. Another day. Getting tired of this minute-by-minute report.

When I'm thinking between birds I think of what a good contribution I make to this world feeding and protecting little birds, because they must be recognized for the good that they do. And cherished for their beauty, their song, and their marking of the changing seasons. And I like to think of some of the special visitors—the Evening Grosbeaks are maybe my most special. But I'm also especially pleased when the Pine Warbler comes by, but my heart really belongs to my regulars. I also must confess that I don't like all birds. I particularly dislike Starlings. I know, I know, they are so industrious, so successful, so sure of themselves, but—dammit, there is a limit. Think of the lovely Bluebird picked and screamed out of his home by the outrageous Starling. If I could do something, I don't know what, I certainly would. Good intentions? Poooh! Good for what?

Yes, my free meals are welfare. Some say welfare will eventually drive us all up “Lazy Bones Ally.” People, “maybe.” Birds “No.!” There are some who pooh-pooh the idea of bird feeders, me for instance, having thoughts looking out on the world. But I do something real. While sometimes I feel rather vacant—empty is a better word. If you fill me up and keep me full, remember that you are feeding yourself when you feed your loved ones. They are your loved ones, you know. How could it be otherwise? All of these little Chickadees, Finches, Sparrows, Juncos, Titmice and Wrens—they are so real, so earnest, working so hard to be alive.

